



State of Tennessee
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Tennessee State Library and Archives
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**LT. GOVERNOR JOHN WILDER'S OFFICE
RECORDS
1969-1976**

RECORD GROUP 73

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SCOPE AND CONTENT

In 1971 the State Senate elected John Shelton Wilder, a veteran of six years' service, Lt. Governor and Speaker, succeeding Frank C. Gorrell. Governor Wilder represents the 26th district, which includes his native Fayette County in West Tennessee. A graduate of the University of Tennessee's College of Agriculture, Governor Wilder earned a law degree at Memphis State University. Having run his family's business, the Longtown Supply Company, for many years, Governor Wilder served as President of related professional associations: the Tennessee Cotton Ginners' Association and the Tennessee Agricultural Council. As active in the public sector as he is in the private sector, Governor Wilder's correspondence reflects these responsibilities. Included in the list of correspondents are the Somerville Bank and Trust Company (he is a member of the Board of Directors), the Fayette County Court (he has been a member for eighteen years), the National Association of Conservation Districts, and the Executive Committee on the National Conference of the Council of State Governments.

The title of Lieutenant Governor is primarily an honorary title conferred upon the Speaker of the Senate, although the Constitution of Tennessee directs the Lt. Governor to succeed the governor's office, if necessary; and Governor Wilder announced early in his tenure that he felt the Constitution should be amended to allow for the popular election of the Lt. Governor. As Speaker of the Senate, Governor Wilder presides over the Senate sessions and directs the activities of the Chief Sergeant-at-Arms. The Record Group's Administrative and Correspondence Series illustrate some of the details of this aspect of the office: his appointments of Chaplains, Doctors, and Honorary Sergeant-at-Arms. More important to the legislative process, the Speaker appoints chairmen and members of the legislative committees and commissions. Unfortunately, Governor Wilder's papers have little documentation of this process. The Special Committees and Commissions Series and the Press Secretary Series show the membership of only those bodies with which Governor Wilder served. The only list of committee appointments is that for the 1973 session, and it is incomplete.

There are a number of committees on which the Lt. Governor is required by statute to serve. As Vice Chairman of the Building Commission, he participates in the approval and overall supervision of construction for state agencies. Governor Wilder's files include all the agendas of the Commission meetings, outlining the proposals and--more important--the agencies' statement of justification for the projects. Not until Governor Wilder's second term as Speaker does his correspondence reflect a greater involvement in the Building Commission's activities. Not surprisingly, the projects in and the architectural firms from West Tennessee attracted Mr. Wilder's particular interest. At one point, the correspondence reveals Governor Dunn felt the Building Commission was interfering with his administration's planning when it insisted on selecting architects for various projects. Governor Dunn believed the Commission had only the right of approval of the administration's choices.

As Speaker of the Senate, Governor Wilder is also an ex-officio member of the Council of Pensions and Retirement, created by statute in 1971 to make recommendations on standards and policies for state retirement programs. As a member of this Council, Governor Wilder's correspondence shows the considerable attention he received from the Tennessee Education Association and most of the state's retired teachers' groups.

Among the most important bodies with which the Speaker serves is the Fiscal Review Committee, and its functions are generously represented in Governor Wilder's files. Created in 1967 as a special continuation committee of the General Assembly, the Fiscal Review Committee conducts a continuing review of the state's fiscal concerns, such as revenue collections, the state debt, and reserves; and it submits reports to the General Assembly on a regular quarterly basis and on special request. Most important, the Fiscal Review Committee studies and makes recommendations on proposed legislation which may affect the state financially.

Governor Wilder's tenure has witnessed a re-organization in 1977 of the Legislative Council, which is now the Joint Legislative Services Committee. During the period presently covered by this Record Group, the agency was the Legislative Council, and Governor Wilder's papers reflect its vital role in the working of the Legislature. The Council was directed by resolutions of the General Assembly to conduct studies of certain issues or proposals and then to recommend whether and what legislation should be drawn up to address the issues or carry out the proposals. The Legislative Council also had a staff of attorneys and stenographers; and upon request of the chairmen, these attorneys and stenographers would be assigned to committees to assist in the drafting of legislation. The creation of the Joint Legislative Services Committee organized the services it provides in three separate sections. Administrative Services handle budget, equipment, maintenance, and other "housekeeping" duties for the Legislature. Legal Services maintain the staff of attorneys needed to draw up legislation and give legal advice to committees in session. Legislative Services provide the computer and printing services needed to keep legislators informed of the status of all bills before the General Assembly. The Record Group portrays the Legislative Council's increasing burdens which were to lead to the re-organization in 1977.

The Special Committees and Commission Series includes the files of temporary committees with which Governor Wilder was involved; among them were the Economic Development Commission of 1971, the Improvements in the State Government Commission of 1974 and the Law Revision Commission.

This Record Group touches on a number of interesting historical aspects. The papers outline the growth of a strong personal relationship between John Wilder and Winfield Dunn, in spite of the strains between a Democratic Legislature and the Republican Administration. Early in 1971 Governor Wilder expressed his concerns to local political leaders about the disorganization of the Democratic Party in the wake of a Republican victory. A year later Governor Wilder was defending Governor Dunn's position in the face of criticism from a constituent. The strength of their friendship led to a surprisingly open and frank exchange of letters when political differences came to a head.

In 1973 and as late as April 1974, Governor Wilder was considered a front runner for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination. His correspondence indicated how seriously he considered making the race, but there is an unfortunate lack of information about his decision to withdraw his name from the field. Until fairly late Ray Blanton's name was dismissed as a possible candidate, but Blanton's "Plank Paper" are included in the Record Group. There is also a good deal of correspondence to J.D. Wallace regarding personnel matters written after Blanton's election. It compares interestingly to that sent to Dunn's Commissioner of Personnel, Robin Beard, four years earlier.

The Record Group deals with events of national interest as well. Approval of the ERA was rescinded in this period. The bulk of Governor Wilder's mail from individuals on the subject urged him to support rescission, while women's professional associations uniformly opposed rescission. Among his constituents Governor Wilder heard greater opposition to ERA; and that was the way he voted; but it is fairly clear he was able to vote his personal inclination. The year 1973 also saw the Arab oil embargo, and many references are made to the administration's efforts to meet the crisis of the energy shortage. Governor Wilder was also involved in the national debate on "no-fault" insurance. As a lawyer, Governor Wilder at first opposed its adoption-stating he feared it would deny the individual's rights of redress in a court of law. Later he changed his position and supported a modified proposal.

A statewide issue which generated a great deal of documentation was the proposal and eventual establishment of the East Tennessee Medical School. Why Governor Wilder supported its creation in the final vote is not clear from the records here. Most of the materials related to it-particularly the mail from his home district-argue against it.

Most of Governor Wilder's purely political activities are reflected in the Administrative Series; many of these papers were generated by Frank Gorrell's tenure. They included a copy of Governor Wilder's Democratic Unity Statement issued in 1973 and the Democratic Caucus papers in 1974.

The last section of the Record Group comes from the files of Penny Edwards, Press Secretary. Governor Wilder has abolished this position on his staff since 1974 because his relations with the press are not formally structured. Press contacts are now handled by Governor Wilder's Administrative Assistant as the need arises. The bulk of Miss Edwards' files deal with the proceedings of committees whose records are virtually absent from those of Governor Wilder. Therefore, one must assume Miss Edwards' primary duty was to act as his representative at the meetings of these committees, whose activities garnered the attention of the press. They included investigations of the correctional system and studies of the creation of a department of children's services and proposed anti-trust and conflict of interest legislation.

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